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No. 352

MISS MARIA

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT

FROM OLD CHESTER TALES BY MARGARET DELAND

DRAMATIZED BY MAUDE B. VOSBURGH

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PRICE 25 CENTS

NEW YORK
SAMUEL FRENCH
PUBLISHER
28-30 WEST 38TH STREET

LONDON
SAMUEL FRENCH, LTD.
26 SOUTHAMPTON STREET
STRAND

NO PLAYS EXCHANGED

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PERSONS

MISS MARIA WELWOOD *A middle-aged gentlewoman, erect, bright-eyed, and rosy-cheeked, with a sweet voice and a refined manner*

MISS ROSE *Twenty-five years old, pretty, impulsive, and fun-loving*

MR. CHARLES WELWOOD *A supercilious young man about thirty, tall and prim, with a nervous movement to his fingers*

MRS. MATILDA BARKLEY *About fifty, stout and unshapely, blunt in manner and plain in appearance*

MR. EZRA BARKLEY. *A placid bachelor of fifty, portly, and of middle-height, excessively polite in manner and ponderous in conversation*

MR. CHARLES WELWOOD'S *four small children*

The action passes in Old Chester, in Miss Maria Welwood's sitting-room, about 1860.

COSTUMES

Miss Maria. Gray cashmere, simply made, with white lace at her neck and wrists. Dainty muslin apron.

Miss Rose. Pink challie with a floral design. Broad-brimmed hat with ribbons hanging; short, loose sacque. Both of these gowns should be quaint and picturesque.

Mrs. Barkley. Stiff, black silk, voluminous skirt, tightly buttoned basque with flowing sleeves; small black bonnet trimmed grotesquely with white daisies; spectacles; small parasol; a mother-of-pearl card case; Congress shoes, and white stockings.

Mr. Barkley. Formal afternoon dress of the period; silk hat; eye glasses; fob; gold-headed cane.

Mr. Charles Welwood. Fashionable, new business suit of the time.

MISS MARIA

SCENE: *A door at* R. *opens outside. A door opens to an entry at* L. *Windows are at the back showing a garden. Before the windows stands a table holding tumblers of jelly. Up* R. *is a secretary or chest of drawers with candles and tip-mirror. Up* L. *is a fireplace, chair, and foot-stool.* R. *of center are arm-chairs on either side of a table.*

Curtain rises on empty stage. Old-fashioned door bell jingles at R. ROSE *enters* L. *door which is open, hastily removing a big gingham apron which she rolls into a ball and tosses behind secretary as she approaches* R. *door.*

ROSE. (*Opening* R. *door*) A telegram for Miss Maria? All right, thank you. (*Shuts door and calls as she starts to cross*) Cousin Maria.

MISS MARIA. (*Answering off* L.) I am coming. (*Enters,* L., *trying on dainty apron*)

ROSE. (*Center, passing telegram*) A telegram for you, dear.

MISS MARIA. (*Opening telegram*) I hope it isn't bad news about Charles's wife or the new baby. Let's see, yes—(*Reading with* ROSE *leaning over her shoulder*) "Wife needs quiet." Poor thing. "Will bring children for visit this afternoon." Isn't that delightful!

ROSE. (*Going up for apron, smiling*) It's best to take unavoidable visitations in that spirit.

MARIA. (*Studying telegram*) "This afternoon." They'll be here soon then.

ROSE. The telegram was delayed. (*Resignedly shaking the wrinkles out of her apron and folding it up neatly*) And I guess our supper will be too, with five extra to feed.

MARIA. (*Poking the fire*) Fortunately Jane put up plenty of pear preserve before she left us. The children will get enough.

ROSE. Charles acts as if your house were a regular charity home for children. He gets such a good salary, why doesn't he pay their board?

MARIA. (*Coming down to the table*) The idea! Ever since I received the poor little orphan as my brother's legacy, I have treated him like my own son. If I am only a great-aunt to the children, I can try to fill the place of a grandma.

ROSE. (*Speaking softly and petting* MARIA) You have been a mother to me too ever since I can remember. (*She sits* L. *near the table to rip apart the breadths of an old woolen skirt*) I don't mean to find fault with your arrangements.

MARIA. (*Smoothing* ROSE'S *hair*) Oh, I didn't think that my dear! (*She becomes absorbed in the telegram*) See, just ten words! Charles is so businesslike, never wastes a word!

ROSE. (*With a little sigh*) If he could only turn the words he saves into dollars!

MARIA. (*Passing her hand caressingly over* ROSE'S *shoulder*) I wish I could get you a new gown for this winter, Rose. It troubles me to see you make that old one over again.

ROSE. (*Smiling adoringly up at her*) If you can wear your old one dear, I can wear mine.

MARIA. (*Going up*) They ought to be here now. (*Standing at windows and looking* L.) I see something tall and white. Yes, that's Charles with Eddie in his arms. Isn't he a good father to carry that heavy boy! See, Rose, here they come! The three children are walking as fast as their father,

bless their little hearts! Here they are, Rose! (*Waves her apron by the lower hem*) Come and look at them.

(Rose, *with a gesture of impatience, puts down her work, and joins* Maria *at* c. *back.* Rose *waves her hand and throws a kiss.* Miss Maria *hurries off* l. *with great animation, exclaiming.*)

Maria. I'll let them in the back door and take them right up-stairs. (*Children's voices off* l.) Hello! How d'y do, Auntie. Auntie, have you got a kitten? (Miss Maria *outside*) You precious children! How do you do! I'm so glad to see you. Go right up-stairs.

(Rose *picks up her work and sits* r. *of table and rips vehemently. The voices recede. Then* Charles *appears at* l. *door and speaks back as he closes it.*)

Charles. Good-afternoon, Rose. (*Leans walking-stick near door*)

Rose. (*Without rising*) How do you do, Charles.

Charles. (*Puts hat and gloves on table, and then walks aimlessly about the room*) Pretty well, thank you.

Rose. (*Eyeing him critically*) You look well. That new suit——

Charles. Aunt Maria brought us up to dress nicely.

Rose. It's quite becoming. Where did you get it?

Charles. (*Arranging necktie before mirror on secretary. Testily*) I don't know how it concerns you; it's bought and paid for. You don't suppose I stole it?

ROSE. Oh, dear, no! You wouldn't steal so much as a bird's egg. You were always such a good little boy!

(MISS MARIA *enters* L. *carrying an empty wood-basket. She starts to fill it from the basket beside the fireplace.* CHARLES *takes it from her with reluctance, and puts in three logs which he handles with the tips of his fingers; he then draws a clean handkerchief from his pocket and dusts off his hands fastidiously.*)

MARIA. The children are all around the big stove in my room getting nice and warm. (*Center*) How is the baby? What's her name?

CHARLES. We have decided to name her Maria, for you.

MARIA. (*Touched*) My dear Charles! (*Looking to* ROSE *for sympathetic comprehension*) I only hope I shall prove worthy of the honor.

CHARLES. (*Crosses to mirror to brush off his coat*) I knew you would be pleased, so I thought I would announce it to you in person.

ROSE. I hope that you also bring good news from the Oil-Can Company.

(MISS MARIA *listens eagerly for his reply.*)

CHARLES. (L. *of* ROSE, *behind table. Snubbing* ROSE) No news is good news, Auntie.

ROSE. (*Rising. Persisting*) But considering that Cousin Maria has invested nearly all her money in it, Charles, I think you should keep her informed.

CHARLES. (*Continuing to ignore* ROSE) Of course the enterprise is still in its infancy, but don't worry a bit about the outcome of the investment. (*Going down to* L.) I give all my time to it, and watch over your interest as if it were my own.

MARIA. (*Coming down to chair* L. *of table and sitting.* ROSE *sits also*) I have perfect confidence in your judgment.

(CHARLES *crosses to* MISS MARIA *and draws a note-book and pencil from his vest-pocket and figures in it for* MISS MARIA'S *benefit. He holds it so high, however, that only by stretching her neck and straining her eyes can she see his writing.*)

CHARLES. (*Leaning over her chair*) The rural population of the United States is so many. We'll allow seven souls to a family. No, we might as well make a conservative estimate and allow ten; it's easier to divide by ten.

MARIA. Excuse me, Charles, but there are some families where there are only two, like Rose and me; still I suppose it is better to be on the safe side.

CHARLES. Certainly. (*Straightens up*) Now then, dividing the rural population by ten, that makes so many families that must depend on oil for artificial light. (MISS MARIA *acquiesces gravely throughout his explanation*) Therefore, each family must have an oil can, and ours is the best ever invented. You can see for yourself that with a few cents' profit on each one, the net receipts will be enormous.

MARIA. (*Rising*) You always explain things so clearly. (*Goes up to fireplace*) I wish I had a better head for business.

CHARLES. (*Condescendingly, as he pockets his note-book*) As there is a man in the family, it doesn't matter. I'm expecting a letter to-day from the Secretary of the Company with the latest news of the law suit.

ROSE. A law suit?

CHARLES. (*Airily*) There are usually legal contests before one of these new inventions can clear

the industrial field. Business men think nothing of them.

(MISS MARIA *lifts the wood-basket.* CHARLES *merely makes a polite pretence.*)

CHARLES. Allow me.

MARIA. No, I'll take it up. I'm going to get my paint-box to amuse the children. (*At door*) Rose will look after you. (MARIA *goes out* L. ROSE *glances keenly at* CHARLES *as she resumes her ripping*)

ROSE. I guess you can manage to look after yourself all right. I wish I could make such a good appearance.

CHARLES. (*Observing the skirt*) Isn't that going to be presentable?

ROSE. Yes, but I do need a new coat. (*Short pause*) Why don't *you* look after *me*, Charles, for a change? Lend me twenty-five dollars, won't you? You get such a good salary. (*She watches him intently*)

CHARLES. (*Standing at the fire warming his hands*) I should be glad to oblige you, Rose, but my income is not what it was.

ROSE. I thought you received so much a month.

CHARLES. That was a temporary arrangement while I was placing the stock for the Company. After the shares were all sold, I was to have a permanent position in the factory.

ROSE. I suppose they're sold by this time. (*Stopping her work*) You say Cousin Maria has a controlling voice in the affairs of the Company. I'm sure she has stock enough. (*Rising suddenly*) Look here, Charles, do you mean (*Walking up*) you received a commission on every share of stock you have sold?

CHARLES. (*Turns toward her, startled*) What?

Oh, of course the expense of organization is paid from the proceeds of the sale of stock.

ROSE. Then out of every twenty dollars you got from her, you pocketed two or three, I suppose. (*Goes down*) No wonder the Company found your services of value!

CHARLES. (*Turning again to fire*) You don't understand such things, Rose. If you had any head for business, I'd explain.

ROSE. (*Goes up*) I don't understand such crooked methods, I admit. (*Goes down*) If I did, I should have seen through them long ago. (*Throws down her scissors and dress*)

CHARLES. (*Facing her with cold formality as she approaches him*) The money, as stated in the circular, goes toward obtaining valuable patent rights and the manufacture of the oil cans. The factory—

ROSE. (*Indicating the chimney by a gesture. Up* R.) Four brick walls as empty as this chimney!

CHARLES. (*Angrily*) You see it's no use trying to explain matters.

ROSE. (*Turning her back to him and moving down*) Oh! I get all out of patience with you! I can't pin you down to anything.

CHARLES. (*Following her down, with a cross expression but a conciliatory tone*) You always get out of humor when I try to talk sensibly with you. You don't stop to consider Aunt Maria's interests. (*Takes hat and gloves from table*) Here I am now, tired out, yet I'm going down to the post office to see if there are any letters with good news. (*Slides out* L., *leaving the door open*)

ROSE. (*Turning and seeing he is gone, calls after him, speaking louder and louder*) You might at least shut the door, Charles. The little coal we have left won't warm up all outdoors.

CHARLES. (*Returns to door, and speaks severely*) I regret I left the door open. The children are not

accustomed to hearing such angry tones. I must request you, Rose, to control your temper in their presence. (*Goes out, closing the door softly*)

(Rose *gives a gasp of impatience, seizes the tip-mirror from the secretary, and thumps it down on the floor* L. *center by the table. Her expression shows that she is trying to master her anger, as she stands* C. *and holds breadths of old gown up to her figure to judge of their length from her reflection in the mirror. Meantime* Mrs. Barkley *and* Mr. Ezra Barkley *pass behind the wall and approach the door from* R. Mrs. Barkley *lifts her full skirts high enough to display a bit of white stocking, and manages with difficulty a small parasol and a card case.* Mr. Ezra *bears aloft in both hands, with concern, a large plate covered with a napkin. His gold-headed cane hangs by the crook from one wrist.* Mrs. Barkley *spies* Rose *through the glass doors and nudges* Ezra *to look. He keeps his gaze steadily fixed on the pie.* Rose, *hearing the jingle bell, attempts to conceal her sewing by bunching it up on the secretary as she goes to open the door.*)

Rose. Why, how d'y do, Mrs. Barkley!

Mrs. Barkley. (*Entering* R. *door*) You needn't tuck your sewing away, Rose; it's nothing to be ashamed of. (*Up* R. *She examines it during the following*)

Rose. (*Pushing a chair toward* Ezra) Good-afternoon; won't you take a chair, Mr. Ezra?

Mr. Ezra. (*Stepping in toward* R. *behind table*) We *are* quite dependent upon chairs. Did you know, Miss Rose, that chairs were used in Egypt in 3300 B. C.?

Rose. Won't you sit down, Mrs. Barkley?

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Nodding her head in approbation as she lays down* ROSE'S *work*) You ought to be proud that you can make over your clothes, though it's a shame you have to pinch this way. I wish Charles had more of your ability. It's men like Charles that marry, though. There's Ezra. (EZRA *still stands placidly, holding the pie*) Put the mince-pie on the table, Ezra! (EZRA *obeys*) He would make a model husband, just like his brother. No widow ever had more cause to mourn than I! (*Shakes her head dejectedly and turns to look at the jelly which she holds up against the light.* EZRA. *walking sedately around the table, stumbles over the mirror, without being disconcerted, however, and places it on the center table.* ROSE, R. *of table, lifts up a corner of the napkin to admire the pie*)

ROSE. There's *one* thing I don't believe you know, Mr. Ezra; how many raisins there are in that pie!

EZRA. (L. *of table, bowing politely*) I could only hazard a conjecture. Have you any idea of the computed number of eggs in a shad-roe?

ROSE. Oh, I dare say there are four or five hundred.

EZRA. Allow me to inform you that there are one hundred thousand. Naturally, it varies; that is only the approximate number.

ROSE. Dear me, it's quite serious to think of eating so many little fish at a time.

MRS. BARKLEY. Jane's jelly looks fine.

ROSE. I put that up.

MRS. BARKLEY. Why didn't Jane do it?

ROSE. Jane left yesterday.

MRS. BARKLEY. Not discharged?

ROSE. Yes.

MRS. BARKLEY. What! After seventeen years of service in this house?

ROSE. (*Crossing to* L.) Yes; it can't be helped.

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Coming forward excitedly with*

glass of jelly in her hand) I suppose all this frightful economy is due to that thief Charles.

ROSE. (*Laughing to herself*) Oh! I wish that door *were open.*

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Continuing, standing with* ROSE *on one side* L. *and* EZRA *on the other* R.) Maria has always been a fool over that selfish boy.

EZRA. (*Trying to stop her*) My dear Matilda!

MRS. BARKLEY. Well, Ezra, everybody knows that Rose has always been a help to Maria and Charles a hindrance.

EZRA. Only a mythological hero would undertake the quest of discovering anyone surpassing Miss Rose in character and accomplishments.

(ROSE *is watching* L. *door much amused.* ROSE *makes a curtsey.*)

MRS. BARKLEY. You hear, Rose, what Ezra says?

ROSE. (*Demurely*) And if Charles hears it——

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Grabbing* ROSE'S *right hand and forgetting to hold the jelly glass upright, which is in her right hand*) You don't mean that Charles is here?

ROSE. (*Responding with a nod*) And the children.

MRS. BARKLEY. I think it's a perfect imposition. This is the seventh visit he has made since he was married.

EZRA. My dear Matilda! If Miss Maria hears!

(CHARLES *opens* L. *door and and puts his head in.*)

MRS. BARKLEY. I'd like to know how that Universal Oil-Can is getting on.

EZRA. I trust it will hold out like the Widow's Cruse.

(CHARLES *feels for walking-stick.*)

MRS. BARKLEY. I shouldn't be surprised if Maria didn't get a cent out of it, the pious rascal! (*The stick drops with a clatter,* CHARLES *slams the door and they turn guiltily.* EZRA *looks horrified;* ROSE, *mischievous;* MRS. BARKLEY *raises her hands and lets them fall on her knees as she drops into a chair*)

EZRA. I apprehend he has paid the forfeit of listeners.

ROSE. (*Rescues the glass of jelly with which* MRS. BARKLEY *has been gesticulating violently during her tirade against* CHARLES) He shouldn't have been round when he wasn't wanted.

MRS. BARKLEY. Oh, he has always been in the way. Spoilt Maria's chances of marrying long ago.

ROSE. (ROSE *on her way up with jelly whirls round, center. In her surprise also forgets the jelly*) Why, did Cousin Maria ever care for anyone?

MRS. BARKLEY. There was never anyone special.

EZRA. (*Behind table*) Do not be too sure. Miss Maria is made of the stuff of martyrs. She may have cultivated concealment like——

MRS. BARKLEY. Fiddlesticks! What does an old bachelor know about it? Where is she? Amusing those young ones?

ROSE. (*Center*) Yes, I'll go and play with them, and send her down. (ROSE *goes out* L. *scrutinizing the glass of jelly with a dubious expression*)

EZRA. (R. *of table. Beginning to fidget*) I must be going.

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Looking after* ROSE) Rose is a most superior girl. Still she *does* eat and she has to have clothes, consequently, she's an expense to Maria. I wish she had a home of her own, Ezra.

EZRA. (*Stands by the fire in a reflective attitude*) She converses somewhat rapidly. At times I find it difficult to——

MRS. BARKLEY. To follow her? Oh, you would get used to that.

EZRA. To comprehend her. Still she is a pleasing young lady. (EZRA *takes off his glasses and rubs the bridge of his nose thoughtfully*)

MRS. BARKLEY. She's twenty-five. I call that just the right age for a man of fifty, and Maria has brought her up to have the greatest respect for you; (*Turns toward* EZRA) I've heard her myself tell Rose that your conversation is most improving.

EZRA. (*After breathing on his glasses, polishes them with his handkerchief, and holds them up to see if they are clear*) Were you aware, Matilda, that glass was discovered by the accident of——

MRS. BARKLEY. No, I wasn't! Maria looks all worn out. Of course she wouldn't take our money, though she thinks it perfectly right for that rogue Charles to take hers. I declare, I don't know where it's all going to end.

EZRA. The end sanctifies the means. "Finis coronat opus."

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Breaking in*) To go back to Rose, Ezra; to be perfectly open; if you are thinking of settling, I must say that Rose is one girl in a thousand. I don't want to influence you, but I must say that.

(MISS MARIA *enters* L., *stops suddenly on seeing* EZRA, *and comes down beaming with delight.* MRS. BARKLEY *rises to greet her. They shake both hands.*)

MARIA. Why, Mr. Ezra! I didn't know you were here!

EZRA. (*Bows bashfully and goes down to table*) I trust you don't consider it an intrusion.

MARIA. It is a compliment to receive a call from a gentleman in the afternoon.

EZRA. (*Uncovers the pie and folds up the nap-*

kin) I am charmed to be of service. A lady must be mistress of unusual dexterity to manage simultaneously her apparel and a pie.

MARIA. (*At table, admiring pie*) I'm sure I'm most indebted to you, Mr. Ezra. You are not going? I hope you will come again soon.

EZRA. (*His diffidence culminating*) Ah, yes! Quite so, thank you. Good-afternoon. (*He bows himself out* R.)

MRS. BARKLEY. I made my Thanksgiving mincemeat a little earlier than usual, so I thought I'd just bring you a taste. (MARIA *starts to untie* MRS. BARKLEY'S *bonnet-strings;* MRS. BARKLEY *remonstrates*) I mustn't stop. I want to make several calls.

MARIA. You are always so generous, Matilda, you make me feel ashamed of myself. There is that slipper-bag I promised you over a month ago. (MARIA *goes to the secretary drawer, fumbles under the circulars of oil-can company, scattering them round on the floor, and produces an embroidered slipper-bag which she presents to* MRS. BARKLEY) Here it is at last. I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting.

MRS. BARKLEY. You needn't apologize. (*Examining it*) I've lived all my life without one; I guess a week or two more won't hurt me. Besides, I don't wear slippers. Still, I'm obliged to you.

(*They seat themselves near the table.* MARIA R., MRS. BARKLEY L.)

MARIA. To tell the truth, I've had a good deal on my mind lately. I suppose Rose told you that Charles is here?

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Folding her hands at her waist*) Yes, with all those children, except the last one. I dare say he is perfectly delighted with that?

MARIA. (*With spirit*) I should hope so! How can you pretend to be so heartless, Matty? Would you have a parent indifferent to his offspring?

MRS. BARKLEY. (MRS. BARKLEY *unties her bonnet strings*) Indifferent! I call it something worse than indifferent. I don't think a man has any right to have children if he can't support them. When they are too much for him, he just brings them to you. If they were kittens, he would drown 'em.

MARIA. (*Reprovingly*) My dear Matilda!

MRS. BARKLEY. There's no use getting into a passion, Maria. You know I'm always perfectly open with you. Why aren't you as frank with me about that oil-can company? You must be awfully worried.

MARIA. I confess I am a little disturbed; not for myself, you know, but for my dear young people.

MRS. BARKLEY. There! That's just like you. You would live on bread yourself, as long as you could get bread and butter for Rose, and bread and butter and jam for Charles's children. (MRS. BARKLEY *moves her chair away from table and points with a snort to the jelly in the window*) But you, you poor, dear Maria, (*She sniffs again*) you're just a perfect fool. (*She breaks out sobbing and wipes her eyes on the slipper-bag, exclaiming brokenly*) For my part, I'd never waste my time making things like this.

(MARIA *kneels at her* R. *side and puts her arms round her. They are both affected.*)

MARIA. My dear Matty, what should I do without you!

MRS. BARKLEY. Just come and live with me, Maria. I shall think it all providential if you'll only come.

MARIA. My dear friend, it's worth while to be

poor. (*Rising and bracing up*) No, my dear, you mustn't urge it. If things turn out worse than I anticipate, I have a little plan.

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Anxiously*) What is it?

MARIA. It's going to be a surprise, but I'm sure it will be a good thing. (*Sitting again* R. *of table*) I have decided to open an academy for young ladies.

MRS. BARKLEY. A boarding-school?

MARIA. An academy, on the lines of Miss Brace's, where we passed so many happy hours together, dear Matty. Can't you just see Miss Brace with those white curls and the turban when she opened the classes? My gracious, how we girls used to shiver when she pointed her forefinger at us. (*Mimics* MISS BRACE) I shan't do that, anyhow.

MRS. BARKLEY. Nobody would shiver if you *did*. Miss Brace was very genteel and dignified, but if you think, Maria Welwood, that *you*——

MARIA. (*Rising*) Oh, of course not. But I've got my notes, and I'm going to say just the same things.

MRS. BARKLEY. Do you remember how she used to make us carry atlases on our heads? (*Rising*) You are so erect, I believe you could do it now.

MARIA. I'll try. (*She pulls a large, thin book off the table and walks about the room, balancing it on her head, while* MRS. BARKLEY *watches her with admiration*) Listen. These are some of her notes I committed to memory: "The making of wax flowers is an art most suitable for young ladies; frost and snow may reign around us, and nip the tender blossoms in our gardens, but our houses may still be made elegant by delightful representations of Flora's children." (*Enthusiastically, as she removes the atlas*) We began with the pomegranate flower.

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Morosely.* R. *of table glancing*

at the framed wreaths on the wall) I don't believe anyone would pay a quarter to learn how to make a pomegranate flower, nowadays; I'm sure I wouldn't. I don't believe you remember how, anyway.

MARIA. (*Cheerfully putting back the book and sitting opposite* MRS. BARKLEY *at the table.* MARIA *at* L.) Of course, I'll have to brush up a little. In arithmetic, all the answers are in the book, so I'll know when the sums are right. History is the only thing I'm nervous about, and Rose is pretty fresh in that.

MRS. BARKLEY. (*At* R. *of table*) Such nonsense! Suppose Rose were to get married! You couldn't get along by yourself, so what's the use of beginning?

MARIA. Rose get married? Well, I don't see any prospect just now.

MRS. BARKLEY. If she did, you'd go and live with her, so why not both of you come to my house till then?

MARIA. (*Rising*) I wouldn't think of living with her, no indeed. But no young gentleman is waiting on Rose. (*Starting to cross toward fireplace*) There aren't any young gentlemen in Old Chester.

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Eyeing her sidewise*) Suppose Ezra took a fancy to Rose?

MARIA. (*Stopping center*) To—*Rose?*

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Sharply*) Yes, Rose! That's what I said.

MARIA. (*Falteringly*) Rose. He's twenty-five years older than Rose. That's quarter of a century.

MRS. BARKLEY. Well, I only said *suppose.*

MARIA. Neither of them ever thought of such a thing.

MRS. BARKLEY. You're not objecting to Ezra, I hope. He'd make her a good husband.

MARIA. (MARIA *stands with her back toward* MRS. BARKLEY *looking over* R. *shoulder down-stage. Blankly*) Why of course I don't object to Ezra.

MRS. BARKLEY. I suppose after taking care of Rose for twenty years, you're startled at the thought of losing her.

MARIA. (*Speaks mechanically with her eyes fixed on vacancy*) No, it wasn't at the thought of losing Rose.

MRS. BARKLEY. I used to hope that you and Ezra might come to an understanding some day. (MISS MARIA *winces*) He always thought very highly of you, and there was a time when you seemed to——

MARIA. (*Returning to* L. *of table*) I never had time to think of marrying. My duty has always been laid out for me. Even now, if I may be the humble instrument in educating young women as we were educated, Matty, to respect their parents, and to honor their God, and to cross a room properly, if I do that I shall feel that the Lord had a purpose in taking away my money.

MRS. BARKLEY. The Lord! Don't put it on the *Lord's* shoulders:—there's no use! Someone's got to talk sense to you. I don't believe you'd get pupils enough to pay for your shoe-strings. Does Rose like the idea of being a school-marm?

(*The four children, playing hoop, run into the garden from* L. ROSE *is romping with them.* MRS. BARKLEY, *sitting with her back to the glass doors, cannot see what is going on outside.*)

MARIA. I haven't mentioned it yet to Rose. There's no need of crossing the bridge till you come to it. (*Turning toward the fire*) You really think that Ezra cares for Rose?

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Rising and approaching* MARIA) Between you and me and the post, I think he's mak-

ing up his mind to offer himself. If she would only give him a little encouragement! She's a good, capable girl, level-headed. She's got just about as much religion as he likes, I mean, she isn't running to church all the time when she ought to be staying at home looking after things. Really, if he had a little encouragement——

(ROSE, *running up to* R. *door and opening it, calls back to the children, who rush in and are pushed gently out and scamper off,* L.)

ROSE. Hurry up, girlies! the first one to reach the back door can have the big cookie I've left on the kitchen table. (*Comes in breathlessly, throws off her sacque and hat*)

MRS. BARKLEY. You seem to be fond of the children, Rose.

ROSE. They don't take after their father a bit.

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Before the tip-mirror on table, tying her bonnet-strings*) Well, I must run along. I might as well stop for the slipper-bag on my way home. You can do up the pie plate with it. I guess it will soon be empty with seven mouths to fill.

MARIA. I'll have them all ready for you. (*Following her to the door*) I'm so glad you came. You are such a comfort to me. (*They embrace*)

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Stepping outside* R. *door and gathering up her skirts*) Good gracious, Maria, you ought to see your tulip-beds!

MARIA. What's the matter? I just put in the bulbs this morning.

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Going off* L.) It's a pretty mess! Those young ones have been trampling all over them. (*She passes behind windows from* R. *to* L.)

MARIA. (*Shuts the door quietly and goes to look*

out windows with ROSE, *then sits in the arm-chair near the fire into which she gazes dreamily*) That won't hurt the flowers.

ROSE. I predict they will blossom before the first oil-can dividend is paid.

MARIA. And when it *is* paid, we'll plant crocuses of many dainty colors all over the lawn.

ROSE. (*Dropping on her knees beside* MARIA *at* L.) Cousin Maria, what would you do if—if the oil-can exploded?

MARIA. (*Seriously*) Oh, it is to be very strong.

ROSE. I meant if it failed, dear.

MARIA. Charles says it can't fail. He says it is absolutely sure.

ROSE. But if—if?

MARIA. Nonsense, my darling! Move back a little; it's bad for your complexion to scorch your cheeks. When I was young we were never allowed to come nearer the fire than the outside edge of the hearth-rug.

ROSE. (*Rising*) Is that the reason your complexion is so pretty?

MARIA. You little flatterer! Mr. Ezra Barkley once paid me a compliment on my color. He was remarking on the number of tons of roses used every year, and then he brought in something about my cheeks in a very polite way.

ROSE. (*Center back. Teasing her*) Oh, Cousin Maria! When is it to be?

MARIA. Fie, fie! At Miss Brace's, Rose, we were told that jests upon the affections were indelicate; not that you meant it so, of course.

ROSE. (*Archly*) The question is, what does Mr. Ezra mean. I shall certainly ask him his intentions.

MARIA. (*Alarmed*) My dear! Miss Brace used to say that any allusions to matters of the heart were exceedingly unladylike. He looks upon

me as an old friend of the family. (*Sighs*) You'll be likely to learn his intentions from his own lips before long.

ROSE. What do you mean?

MARIA. What would you say to him as a suitor, Rose?

ROSE. I wouldn't think of it for a second. Who put such an idea into your head? (*Goes up to table*)

MARIA. He has been most attentive lately. He came to call this afternoon.

ROSE. (*Facing down*) Yes, with his sister, on the way to his office. Did she say anything about it?

MARIA. I don't like to repeat what people say. If you wouldn't make quite so much fun of him, he would be less timid. No one is so kind as he, and I only wish I knew half as much.

ROSE. (*Going to* MISS MARIA) I believe you two have been talking it over. (*Coaxing her*) Come now, what did she say?

MARIA. She says all he needs is a little encouragement.

ROSE. (*Going down to center*) He'll never get it from me. Of course, he's a dear old thing, but— (*Looking reproachfully at* MARIA) I believe you want to get rid of me.

MARIA. (*Rising*) My darling! I don't know how I could ever get along without you. Why, here's Charles!

(CHARLES, *passing the wall, comes up* R. *door and enters, holding up a telegram.*)

ROSE. Did you get good news? (*She makes sure* R. *door is closed after him*)

CHARLES. (*Center*) Not quite what I expected. The amount of alloy in the metal of which we made the oil-cans has been slightly miscalculated, so we

cannot sell at the low price we reckoned. However, we might reduce the cost in time. This regards the infringement on our patent. (*He hands the telegram to* MARIA R. *of* C. *She reads it and looks frightened*)

MARIA. "Oil-can law-suit decided against us. Letter on way. Shall we appeal?" Well?

CHARLES. Possibly, possibly—but we must leave no stone unturned—possibly a little more money might set the thing on its feet.

MARIA. (*Tremulously*) But I haven't any more. (*Drops telegram to floor*)

CHARLES. (*Shaking his head*) Then we must submit to the decrees of an inscrutable Providence. (MARIA *gives a suppressed sob, feels in her pocket, and not finding a handkerchief, takes the slipper-bag from the back of the chair to wipe her eyes*) You must not give way. Remember, "Affliction endureth but for a season."

MARIA. (*Restraining her emotion*) You are such an example to me, Charles.

(*During the foregoing* ROSE *has been standing near the fireplace clinching her hands, her features rigid. She comes forward swiftly, puts her arms about* MARIA, *draws* MARIA'S *head to her shoulder, and then turns furiously on* CHARLES. ROSE *and* MARIA R. *of* C.)

ROSE. Cry, if you want to, you poor thing! Charles, how can you be so heartless, you who influenced her to put nearly every cent she owned into your enterprise?

MARIA. (*Bobbing up her head. Tearfully*) Charles put in all his time.

ROSE. (*To* CHARLES, *putting* MARIA'S *head down again*) I should think you would be ashamed of yourself. We owe everything to her.

CHARLES. I find it very sweet to owe everything to Auntie. Where one loves, one can accept.

ROSE. You must love a good deal.

CHARLES. I do. And just let me say, Rose, it is the little nature that is afraid of an obligation. I cannot hold myself responsible for the outcome of this project. I did not urge her to invest. You remember that I distinctly told you, Aunt Maria, that I considered your business judgment as good as mine.

MARIA. (*Freeing herself from* ROSE) That's quite true, Charles. You are not a bit to blame. Only what are we going to do? What on earth are we *all* going to live on?

CHARLES. My dear Aunt Maria, you always taught me that the Lord will provide. You remember how the Apostle says, (ROSE *goes back to fireplace, disgusted*) "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair." (*Feeling for circular in his pocket with a doubtful glance at* ROSE) Something will turn up.

MARIA. Yes, I can find something to do.

CHARLES. I'll tell you what you might do. (*Approaches* MARIA) You might mortgage the house and invest the money; then you could live on the interest.

MARIA. I don't quite like the idea of a mortgage over my head.

CHARLES. But if you get a good rate of interest, you could pay it off in time.

MARIA. Maybe—I don't know——

CHARLES. A splendid company has just been organized for the sale of spring-water, the Texas Table Temperance Company, known as the Three T's. The Secretary of the Universal Oil-Can Company is the President, first-class man, I know him.

I have a circular in my pocket. (*Produces it*) They'll pay ten per cent dividends at once.

MARIA. But mightn't there be a *little* risk, dear Charles? Not that I don't trust your judgment absolutely.

CHARLES. This speaks for itself. (*Reading, leaning against table,* MISS MARIA *behind table*) "One may easily ascertain the large sums of money made from mineral waters and to what extent they are sold; they are used extensively, not only in hotels but in private houses as well." Umph! (*Turning page*) "Magnitude! The prosperity of any corporation depends on the commodity dealt in, and the largest dividend-paying companies trade in staple goods, namely: sugar, oil, beef, coal, light, heat, and *water!*"

MARIA. That reads well.

(ROSE *starts.*)

CHARLES. (*Continuing to read*) "Whereas, most companies have large funds tied up in patent rights, franchises and the like, which too often prove to be of unsettled value, *this*"——

ROSE. (*Bursting in*) I can't stand this. Cousin Maria shall *not* mortgage the house where she has lived all her life, not if I can help it. Oh, if I were a man!

CHARLES. Lucky you are not! You are so hot-headed you would murder someone. Control yourself.

ROSE. Don't talk that way to me. I feel as if I could murder you. You have pulled the wool over Cousin Maria's eyes long enough; you have fleeced her of her inheritance, and now you are trying to swindle her out of her home where she would spend her old age in kind deeds and gentle thoughts.

Shame on you, to treat her in such a scandalous manner, you penniless good-for-nothing!

CHARLES. I'm not the only poor one she has put up with.

ROSE. She has lost her money through you. I don't know what she may have lost through me——

MARIA. (*Plaintively*) Rose!

ROSE. (*Continuing*) But whatever it is, I'd give my life to make it up to her. (ROSE, *angry, goes up to window*)

CHARLES. (*Walks over to the table, baffled, looking down as if planning his next move*) A most high-minded sentiment.

(MARIA *follows* ROSE.)

MARIA. (*To* ROSE, *pleadingly*) You know, my dear, you never *did* take to Charles.

CHARLES. (*Suddenly notices pie*) What a nice-looking pie, Auntie.

MARIA. (*Comes down, giving her eyes one or two little dabs with her handkerchief*) Yes, it's mince. Mrs. Barkley brought it. I must take it out of the plate. (*Lifts it from the table and starts toward door* L. *Glances back with trepidation at* ROSE *and* CHARLES) Aren't you hungry, Charles?

CHARLES. Why, yes, to tell the truth, I am. I was traveling most of the morning, so all I had for lunch was a sandwich and a cup of coffee.

ROSE. (*Up-stage, facing down*) We didn't have much more.

MARIA. Come right out in the dining-room, Charles. The children are round the table, painting. (CHARLES *opens the door* L. *deferentially for* MARIA *and looks back at* ROSE *spitefully, as they go out.* ROSE *throws up her arms in fury, stands tense, desperate, for an instant, then dashes over to the secretary. She seizes the oil-can circulars which*

litter the floor, crushes them into hard balls, and crossing swiftly to the fireplace, hurls them into the flames, exclaiming in a quivering voice, "These miserable oil-can circulars." Returns to the secretary, snatches another handful from the drawer, as MISS MARIA *re-enters* L.) My child, what are you doing?

ROSE. (*Up center. Frantically continuing the action*) Turning fraud into fuel! It's all the good they'll ever do.

MARIA. (*Crossing to table*) You mustn't be too hard on Charles, dear. See what a beautiful example of submission he gives us. You must remember that he has lost his all. What should I do if he were rebellious or did not put his trust in his Heavenly Father?

ROSE. (*Beside herself*) I don't know. (*Coming down*) I only know that I can't be dependent on you any longer. I'm going to Mercer to get a place in a shop. (*She puts on her hat before mirror and begins to pull on her jacket*)

MARIA. (L. *of table*) You—in a shop! Rose, I couldn't bear it. You wouldn't leave me?

ROSE. Charles can fill my place.

MARIA. (*Trying to restrain her from putting on her jacket*) Charles won't be here always. I need you, Rose.

ROSE. You can get on without me. There's nothing in Old Chester for a girl to do.

MARIA. Rose, I can't allow you to go into a shop. I cannot permit you to expose yourself to the lack of courtesy you would encounter. Besides, there is something for you to do right here, Rose.

ROSE. What, I'd like to know?

MARIA. I have a little plan, Rose, for both of us. I can't get along without you. (*She takes off* ROSE'S *hat*) Come and sit down (*She fetches foot-*

stool from L. *and places it at* L. *of chair*) and we will talk it over. (MARIA *sits* L. *of table*)

ROSE. (*Partly soothed down*) Well? (*Sits on foot-stool*)

MARIA. I'm going to open an Academy; the young ladies may board, or return to their homes at night, as their parents prefer. I shall have to depend on you for a great deal, you are so much fresher in some things. For instance, Rose, I'm ashamed to say I've forgotten the length of the Mississippi River.

ROSE. (*Subdued*) I'm afraid I'd have to look it up, too.

MARIA. We will begin to-morrow to brush up our accomplishments. Don't you want to see if you can carry an atlas on your head, Rose? Just take a few turns round the room. (*Takes book from table*) I tried it and it didn't fall off.

ROSE. (*Wearily*) I'll try it to-morrow.

MARIA. You look tired, dear. I fear I spoke harshly; I didn't mean to scold you. (*She pats* ROSE'S *hand.* ROSE *drops her head in* MISS MARIA'S *lap*)

ROSE. Oh, I feel so wicked! I say such dreadful things, and yet I mean them all; I can't take back a single one. Can you forgive me?

MARIA. Come, come, it will be all right.

ROSE. I wish I were a quarter as good as you are. Charles means well, I suppose, but it isn't enough in this world just to mean well. How could he let you suffer?

MARIA. There, there, you mustn't talk that way. Oh, I don't mean to scold you again. I'm always having to watch my temper. Do try to cheer up, dear.

(*It begins to grow dusk.*)

ROSE. (*Raises her head*) It seems so hard!

MARIA. Of course, it's unfortunate, but it isn't the worst thing in the world. Suppose some of you were dangerously sick. Would I think of mere money then? No, indeed!

ROSE. We'll get along somehow.

MARIA. We'll get along *nicely*. When the children are gone to bed, we'll discuss the Academy. We must try to be pleasant at supper for their sakes.

ROSE. (*Bows her head*) I'll try.

MARIA. And we must not let Charles think we take it too—too seriously. He would feel so hurt!

ROSE. Charles—(*As* ROSE *indignantly throws back her head,* MISS MARIA *places her hand gently over the girl's mouth*)

MARIA. It is almost twilight, my dear. You remember we are told not to let the sun go down on our anger.

ROSE. (*Bows her head*) Let's talk about something else. (*Musing*) Do you suppose Mr. Ezra could give us points on educating young girls?

MARIA. He doesn't know about it yet.

ROSE. You said that Mrs. Barkley said that he—er—liked me?

MARIA. (*Starts.* ROSE *sitting at her feet does not see her agitation*) Yes, she said something of that kind. You seemed to—treat it as a jest.

ROSE. I see the gravity of it now. (*Embracing* MISS MARIA) Whenever I marry, dearest, I want you to promise to make your home with me.

MARIA. That wouldn't do, Rose.

ROSE. You should be willing to stand by me when I am agreeing to stay by you. (MISS MARIA *shakes her head*) Promise, now.

MARIA. Very well.

ROSE. You think all Mr. Ezra needs is a little encouragement?

MARIA. That is what Matty said.

ROSE. (*Rising*) If that is all he wants, it seems a shame he shouldn't get it. I'll tell you, Cousin Maria, what we will do. (*Behind* MARIA'S *chair*) If Mr. Ezra goes to you first, you give him a wee bit; and if he comes to me, I'll give him just a mite, and we'll see what happens.

MARIA. (*Rising*) Rose, Rose, you shouldn't joke about it. You wouldn't marry him unless you really loved him, would you, dear?

ROSE. Tut, tut! What would Miss Brace say? How about allusions to matters of the heart?

MARIA. I beg your pardon. Never mind me, dear. (*Kisses her*) I must get supper for those precious children. They are all alone. Charles went to the post-office for the last mail, to see if the letter comes which was mentioned in the telegram.

ROSE. I'll come and help you in a minute.

(*Exit* MARIA L. ROSE *puts stool back in place* L. *stage.* MR. EZRA *passes and lifts his hat on seeing* ROSE. *"Encouragement!" she exclaims, and smooths down her hair before the tip-mirror.* EZRA *rings.* ROSE *opens the door for* EZRA, *who enters.*)

EZRA. (*Ceremoniously*) I trust I have not come at an inopportune hour.

ROSE. (*Nervously trying to be agreeable*) You are always welcome, Mr. Ezra, Mr. Barkley. Won't you take off your hat? (EZRA *stares*) I mean, your coat?

EZRA. (*Removing his coat and placing it on chair up*) These fall evenings have a penetrating chill in the atmosphere. (*Pause, as* ROSE *shoves a chair toward him, and, after glancing hesitatingly at door* L., *resolutely seats herself* R. *of table*)

EZRA. May I see Miss Maria?

ROSE. She has just gone to get supper for the children. She will be at leisure presently.

EZRA. I wish to speak to her on a matter of great importance. (*Sitting* L. *of table*) It was my intention to address her before I saw you, but possibly Fate has thus made a more auspicious arrangement.

ROSE. Then you will discuss the subject with me first?

EZRA. (ROSE *moves her chair nearer to* EZRA. *He moves away*) Mrs. Barkley stopped for a minute at my office, and informed me that Miss Maria feels herself called upon to open a school. I glean from that that her circumstances are, what you might term, straitened. I regret inexpressibly that ladies should be so situated, as I fear that instructing youth may not be the most congenial occupation for one of your lively temperament.

ROSE. (*Nervously*) I appreciate your kind interest.

EZRA. It is deplorable that through some inadvertence on the part of Charles (*Glancing warily at door* L. *and lowering his voice*)—he is not in, is he?

ROSE. No.

EZRA. (*Raising his voice*)—through his inadvertence that Miss Maria's income is in jeopardy. He has received good news?

ROSE. The worst possible; the oil-can has exploded and all the oil has evaporated.

EZRA. (*Looking about in dismay*) Most distressing, most distressing! Then I must speak to Miss Maria at once.

ROSE. (*Rising and showing her nervousness. Going behind table*) There's no hurry. *She* won't evaporate. (EZRA *crosses* R. *in front of table, following* ROSE; *she dodges, to his confusion*)

EZRA. Quite so. I am solicitous to gain your consent, but I wanted Miss Maria's sanction first; no—I

mean your sanction and Miss Maria's consent. I—I intended to advise with you later.

ROSE. (*Behind table*) That old notion of gaining permission to pay one's addresses to a woman is falling out of fashion. It's trying enough to ask for the parental blessing.

EZRA. I disagree with you, Miss Rose. The old custom should be maintained. But in this case, where there is no parent to consult——

ROSE. Quite so, as you say. When two people stand face to face, and know precisely what they want (*Turns her back on him in her agitation and goes down center*) what's the use of beating about the bush?

EZRA. (*Behind* ROSE *at* R.) Quite so.

ROSE. (*Half tearfully*) You realize then, that Cousin Maria's welfare is indispensable to my happiness?

EZRA. I realize clearly that your happiness is essential to Miss Maria's peace of mind.

ROSE. You don't mean that you, you too, are sacrificing your freedom that Cousin Maria may be free from distress?

EZRA. My dear young lady, I cannot tolerate such an assumption concerning the fair sex.

ROSE. (*Facing him appealingly*) You do understand, don't you, that Cousin Maria couldn't be happy away from this old home, and that I want her to live here always?

EZRA. I am agreeable as far as I am concerned. It rests with Miss Maria. If she gives her consent——

ROSE. *Her* consent! Why do you keep harping on her consent? I thought you had decided to ask for mine, first!

EZRA. (*Amazed*) My dear child! I didn't suppose you were in earnest. Matilda says you never

are. May I ask *your* consent, then, to my proposal for the hand of your cousin, Miss Maria?

ROSE. (*Astounded*) My *consent!* (EZRA *nods*) To Miss Maria! Really? Oh, you dear man! (*She darts toward him to embrace him*) Oh, you dear!

EZRA. (*Mildly, putting her off, much embarrassed*) I hoped for your approval.

ROSE. Of course, of course.

EZRA. If you can furnish me any enlightenment as to Miss Maria's opinions——

ROSE. Don't let her discourage you.

EZRA. I trust you may use your influence in my behalf. It was that I wished to solicit.

ROSE. I'm ready to say (*Business, Benediction*) "Bless you, my children," right away. (EZRA *goes to table.* ROSE *goes up. Aside*) Oh, what an escape!

EZRA. Perhaps you had better inform her I am here.

ROSE. (*Hysterically*) Of course, of course; oh, I'm so happy! (ROSE *dances off left, singing "I'm the last Rose of summer, left blooming alone."*)

EZRA. (*Walking between table and fireplace, raises his hand to his throat*) My respiration is hastened when it should be particularly regular. I should arrange the interview to some extent so as not to startle Miss Maria. (*Draws out his watch to guide his calculation*) Weather first, allow a minute. (*He catches sight of himself in the tip-mirror and stands before it watching his expression*) "I trust your occupations do not keep you indoors too much!"—throw in some data as to exercise. Three minutes, including her reply. Then I will try to bring up financial matters and the hardships of life (*Gesture*) gliding naturally into facts about marriage, five minutes, and so remark that I should be pleased to smooth the path of life

for her feet. (*Consults watch as he puts it in his pocket*) About ten minutes. Quite so.

(MISS MARIA *enters* L. *carrying the pie plate and a piece of brown paper and string. Takes the slipper-bag off the table in passing and approaches* EZRA.)

MARIA. (*Smiling*) In case Matty shouldn't remember to call for these, I'll do them up so you can take them when you go. (*Begins to tie up the parcel, awkwardly*)

EZRA. These November days are very agreeable.

MARIA. Yes. Don't you want to put your finger on this knot?

EZRA. (*Assisting her*) I trust your occupations do not keep you indoors too much.

MARIA. (*They both fumble over the package*) This string slips so. Rose said you were waiting to speak to me on a matter of importance. (*Pause*)

EZRA. (*Bracing himself for the ordeal*) Exercise is indispensable to bodily vigor. In civilized communities, especially, where men lead sedentary lives——

MARIA. (L. *of table*) But you always walk to your office twice a day, Mr. Ezra; I've seen you pass for years, as regularly as the stage-coach. (*Short pause*) Rose seemed very happy. (*She puts the package on the secretary*)

EZRA. Quite so. Financial matters do not weigh upon the young. It is our privilege to so veneer the sordid side of life that they, that they, in short, that they may be perfectly happy. You catch my meaning?

(*They sit opposite each other at the table.* EZRA *at* R., MARIA *at* L.)

MARIA. Rose's happiness is my constant prayer.

I hope to open an Academy, but I dread the repression she will experience.

EZRA. Now, is it not possible to make some other arrangement? In fact, I have in mind a plan of which I came to speak this afternoon. (*He looks at his watch, holding it beneath the edge of the table*)

MARIA. If you mean my going to live with Matty, which she spoke to me about, it is the kindest thing in the world, but I can't do it. I am going to work. As long as Rose is provided for, I can get along.

EZRA. I admire your courage and your determination to open an institution. (*Wiping his glasses and squinting through them*) Most people regard marriage as one of the oldest of institutions, but the fact is the ceremony was not solemnized in church as a religious rite till the time of Pope Innocent III, A. D. 1198, and it was not considered a sacrament till 1442. (*Glances at his watch*)

MARIA. If I only had some of your learning, Mr. Ezra, my Academy would surely be a success.

EZRA. The plan to which I referred had nothing to do with Matilda's suggestion. (*Leaning toward her*) It concerns both you and Rose.

MARIA. (*Shrinking from the idea that he is going to propose for* ROSE) Ah!

EZRA. It seems to combine my sister's wishes with greater, as I may say, convenience, and—and—suitability. Miss Maria, you may not be aware that the average life of the married man exceeds that of the bachelor by some years, and it, I, my sister, (*Glances at watch, pockets it, and continues hastily*) I have given the subject much thought, and I am convinced my plan will be a desirable arrangement.

MARIA. (*Sits very straight and squeezes her hands together tightly*) I know you have Rose's interest at heart.

EZRA. (*With a reminiscent smile*) I venture to

hope that Miss Rose will not object to it if you do not.

MARIA. Rose is very young. I'm sure I don't know her—her sentiments.

EZRA. Miss Maria, I have long felt the deepest esteem for you, and your noble attitude in this unfortunate crisis in your affairs has added admiration to esteem. Miss Maria, the exigencies of the present distressing moment must be my excuse for so abrupt a statement of my, ah, as you might say, regard. (*Rising*) Miss Maria, will you do me the honor to accept my hand? (MISS MARIA *stares at him in astonishment.* EZRA *goes behind table*) You see it will be to me an agreeable solution of this somewhat difficult situation. (*Behind her chair*) I hope that your feelings toward me are not unkind.

MARIA. I don't understand.

EZRA. (*Walking to* L.) I should have been glad to lead up to my request with the proper decorum (*Stopping at extreme* L.) but I assure you of the warmth of my—my sentiments. (MISS MARIA *covers her eyes with her hand.* EZRA *approaching her solicitously*) I trust I have not offended you by the—as you might say—bluntness of my address?

MARIA. No, no, not offended, but surprised, very much surprised. (*Indignantly. Looking up at him*) Why didn't you tell me at once? You couldn't expect me to foresee it after all these years.

EZRA. (*Humbly*) I never dared refer to such a delicate matter before, Miss Maria. You have always had so much to occupy you, that I feared a husband would be in your way.

MARIA. (*Softens*) I don't know what to say. I never thought of such a thing, at least, not—not lately. (*She bows her head on the table.* EZRA *leans over her*)

EZRA. I entreat you, Miss Maria.

MARIA. (*Looking up at him*) Ezra, you do

care for me a little? (*Rises*) It isn't just out of pity?

EZRA. Why, I—(*Stops, and looks about helplessly, then continues, with a break in his voice*) I have never cared for anyone else. (*He kisses her hand and retains it.* MARIA *gives a blissful sigh*)

MARIA. Matty! Perhaps Matty would have wished—something else?

EZRA. (*With straightforward honesty*) Miss Rose can live with us; that will be a gratification to Matilda, beyond a doubt.

MARIA. I'm afraid, Mr. Ezra, I can *not* consider it—unless——

(*Lights up as* ROSE *enters* L. *with lighted lamp, passing behind them roguishly, and places it on table.* MARIA *draws her hand away from* EZRA.)

ROSE. (*Lighting candles on secretary*) I hope you don't require any more light on the subject, Mr. Ezra. (*Audaciously, as* EZRA *follows her up*) Did she give you any encouragement?

MARIA. (*Shocked*) Rose! (MARIA *is left alone* L.)

EZRA. (*To* ROSE) I cannot say.

(ROSE *answers* EZRA *in pantomime during* MARIA'S *exclamations.*)

MARIA. (*Glancing across at* ROSE. *To herself*) Dear me!

EZRA. (*To* ROSE) I'm in perplexity.

MARIA. If she only knew!

EZRA. (*To* ROSE) You would be more urgent?

MARIA. She'll be so surprised!

EZRA. (*To* ROSE) I feel emboldened—(*Goes toward* MARIA)

MARIA. (*Breaking in and going up to center*) I have something to tell you after supper, Rose.

ROSE. I want to know now. (*Folding away old dress in secretary drawer*) I'd like to make a pretty bridesmaid's gown.

EZRA. (R. *of* C. *up*) I recommend you to begin it at once.

(ROSE *flings her arms around* MISS MARIA, L., *and kisses her as* MRS. BARKLEY *rings at* R. *door.* EZRA *opens door and goes behind table* R. *of* C.)

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Entering and crossing front*) Ezra! you here? I seem to be interrupting an affecting scene! Ezra, have you spoken? Rose, I'm so glad!

ROSE. (*Demurely*) Yes'm; so am I. (*Repulsing* MRS. BARKLEY'S *embrace*) The kisses go to Cousin Maria.

MRS. BARKLEY. What do you mean? (*Seeing* EZRA *up center urging* MARIA *toward her*) Well! upon my word! (*Pause*) You don't mean to tell me that he and Maria have come to an understanding?

EZRA. I trust you will favor this arrangement.

MRS. BARKLEY. My dear Maria. (*Hugs and kisses her.* MARIA *tries in vain to ward her off*) Why didn't I think of it myself? I was a perfect fool!

MARIA. (*Center*) Don't go so fast, my dear friend. I haven't had a chance to say a word. I'm just getting my senses back. We must think of the future; not one of us has considered the prospect for the children.

EZRA. (R. *Puzzled*) The children!

MARIA. And Charles too! What's going to become of all of them, I'd like to know.

EZRA. The least judicial mind cannot controvert

the statement that you have acquitted yourself with exemplary patience and fidelity of your duty toward Charles and Charles's growing family, and your brother should not have held you responsible to that extent thirty years ago. You cannot revere too highly the greatest of the virtues, but you might extend your charity a little beyond the bounds of your own home. Consider how long I have waited, Miss Maria!

MARIA. I must try to arrange something for Charles's future.

(CHARLES *enters* R. *door with letter. He bows stiffly to them all, crosses front of table where he leaves his hat and gloves, and speaks with irritation at first.*)

CHARLES. Hope you have not finished supper. The mail was late. Inconveniences are as frequent in a town of this size as worms on a brick sidewalk in a spring rain. You run across them at every step.

MRS. BARKLEY. I don't see why you stay here so much if you dislike it so heartily.

CHARLES. I am happy to say that I shall not be here much more. This is too narrow a field for a man of ability.

(EZRA *straightens up.*)

EZRA. H'm!

CHARLES. Where I am going the outlet is boundless for one's energies. (*Center*)

MARIA. You are going away? (*They gather round table.* CHARLES *crosses to* L. *He speaks condescendingly to* MARIA) I have just had a most flattering offer from the secretary of the Three T's Company.

MRS. BARKLEY. Three *Teas* Company? (*Much pleased*) In Japan?

CHARLES. No; in Texas. The Texas Table Temperance Company.

MRS. BARKLEY. (*Disappointed*) Oh!

CHARLES. It is to be run on a philanthropic basis so as to interest the temperance societies. If we can rely on their support, we should start with a powerful backing. They have offered me the charge of the bottling works, and incidentally wish me to preach to the poor, neglected negroes in the neighborhood.

MRS. BARKLEY. Oh, Lord!

CHARLES. Yes, I never doubted but what the Lord would provide.

ROSE. You intend to go? And to take the children?

CHARLES. Yes, I am told the climate is most desirable. The babies can live outdoors all the time.

MARIA. I have news for you, too, Charles. Mr. Barkley has asked me to become his wife.

CHARLES. Eh? Oh, that's very nice, isn't it? I congratulate you, I'm sure. I said the Lord would provide. (EZRA *shakes hands coldly,* MRS. BARKLEY *turns her back,* MISS MARIA *regards him piteously*) Guess I'll go and tell the children of our departure.

(*There is silence until he has closed the* L. *door after him.*)

MRS. BARKLEY. Good riddance! (MRS. BARKLEY *and* ROSE *give comical sighs of relief, then seeing that* EZRA *and* MARIA *are absorbed in each other,* MRS. BARKLEY *sniffs, and picks up package from the secretary*) Is this the pie plate? I guess I won't take it home, seeing it's all in the family. (*She glances happily at* EZRA, *then suddenly bursts into tears on* ROSE'S *shoulder.* ROSE *leads her gently*

away to the windows. EZRA *and* MARIA *center,* EZRA R., MARIA L.)

EZRA. If there is no obstacle in the way, Miss Maria, I should be pleased to receive the congratulations of Old Chester.

MARIA. (*Glancing up at him with unconscious coquetry*) Don't you think it is time to stop calling me *Miss* (*Pause*) Maria?

(EZRA *holds out his arms and draws her to him as the curtain falls.*)

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